

“THE PRODIGAL SONS”
Joshua 5:9-12, Luke 15:1-3, 116-32

Theme: There is more than one way to refuse the grace of God – one is to waste your life in unrighteousness and another is to waste it in self-pity or indignation. Both require the unending grace of God as portrayed in the Loving Father of the parable!

The parable of the prodigal son has been known to generate visceral disagreement amongst some people. In one church I served, a very polite woman named Bea held up the receiving line after worship to tell me why she was offended by it...not enough punishment for this delinquent younger brother! I imagined Bea had been in the shoes of the elder brother at one time in her life. She was clearly resentful that Holy Scriptures would be soft on the sin of squandering an inheritance! Another gentleman held up the line in yet another congregation when the Gospel reading came from Luke 15. I knew I was in for it when this New York attorney asked politely but firmly: “Are you ready for a rebuttal?!” Thank God for his wife who interceded on our behalf. “Now Henry” was all she had to say. Nevertheless, like the provocative parable that it is – it does not cease to challenge and question – push and pull us into a deeper consideration of the ways of God.

Revisit the plot with me if you will. One day a family seems to be running smoothly, peachy almost. The farm is productive. The cattle are fat. The sons, for the most part, are working hard, dreaming of a future as blessed as their present. We know things are going well because the Father wears long flowing robes – and unlike many poorer farmers, has rings for his fingers. Beautiful, jeweled rings.

Then one day things change. They change quickly. The restless, adventuresome younger son insists upon his share of the inheritance so he can take off and see the world. In most cases parents would say “no”. But in this case, the father says “yes”, perhaps figuring that the only way his son would ever gain wisdom or grow up – is to be on his own for a while. So Father agrees and gives him his inheritance. The son takes off – and falls from grace. Ends up going broke, having nothing but the shirt on his back, working in a place amongst animals no self-respecting Jew would ever go – a pig farm. The activity is shameful!

Then reality sets in. “I will go home and confess my sinfulness – and throw myself on the mercy of my father!” That’s exactly what he does. He goes home. To everyone’s surprise – his father can hardly wait. He does what no other mature Jewish man would do – he sees his son coming home and he runs. He runs like a gazelle. Runs to meet him. This delinquent son was lost and is now found. The child can scarcely get out the words of repentance, before the father says to his servants: “Quickly, bring out a robe. Kill the fatted calf! It’s time to celebrate!” Ask most of us the gist of this parable. It is this: a delinquent child comes to recognize the errors of his ways, and comes home to find a gracious welcome. An undeserved welcome. But a welcome that all of us understand. Whether as a child or parent, we can feel the warmth of homecoming!

But, there is another character. A second son – the older, more responsible sibling. He is the one who stayed home. Worked hard. Obeyed his parents and did not make trouble. As much as the younger son misbehaved, his older brother was the picture of responsibility. When he sees his father open his arms, he is jealous, supremely jealous, keep-him-awake-at-night jealous. Indignantly jealous. Rembrandt Van Ryn's painting of this parable in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg – gives this older brother a prominent place. He stands above his compassionate father looking down, aloof, indignant, and seething inside. Rembrandt captures this parable – he catches the dynamics of the Gospel with 100% clarity. He understands the older brother – who protests loudly – justifiably. My scripture is punctuated with exclamation points: "Listen. I never disobeyed! I never got even so much as a young goat to celebrate! Now you've given little brother a fatted calf!" Older brother will not even go inside, preferring instead to stand and sulk! Jealous of the love his father shows his undeserving brother!

What is the father to do? Turn to Dr. Spock, or to Dr. Phil, or to some other worldly wisdom which can argue this older brother back to normal? Those who have protested this parable would here declare that papa has simply been too lavish! No argument there. Fatted calf. Rings from his finger. Robes. Long flowing robes. Music and the best party around long into the night?! How will the father defend such love? He doesn't! Notice what he says to this jealous elder son who nurses the wounds of self-pity. Though the scripture doesn't say so – you can imagine him embracing this older son – and looking upon him with love: "Son – you are always with me. All that is mine is yours!" If there is a better illustration of God's graciousness – I cannot imagine it. Two sons come home. One from a far country where he had wasted his livelihood. Another from the far country he had built around himself in his resentments and self-pity. In his jealousy. His bitter indignation. Who stands tallest? The father, who possesses enough love to go around! All that is mine is yours. This son was lost and is now found. In reality, both sons have come home. In reality – a parent shows what grace is all about welcoming, consoling, encouraging, loving grace, even when you don't deserve it!

Late Henri Nowen – who is so taken by this parable and Rembrandt's portrayal of it – that he wrote a book – autobiographical, called The Return of the Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming. In it he describes a time in his adult life when he was hit by a car, an accident that brought him very close to death. It became a very dark, frightful time. He began thinking about his father, about his complaints that as oldest, he was not loved enough, cared for enough, cherished enough in comparison to his younger brothers. His dad – advanced in years – flew over to the States from Holland to visit his wounded son. Henri told him explicitly that he loved him and was forever grateful for the love he had shown him growing up. He said many things he had never said before, and was surprised and relieved how his father took his words with a modest smile. As Henri Nowen healed eventually, he looked back on this accident and the confession he made to his father as his homecoming. Eternal words. True words. Words you need, I need to hear. You are with me always: All that is mine is yours!! It became, that conversation, a time and place where he discovered himself a child of God – free to give and receive love that is stronger than death!

Life finds all of us searching for home, for the home where love is not first discovered, but given out as the foundation of life itself. But, we will be slow to find this love, if like the younger son, we look for it in all the wrong places. We will not find the Christ of the Gospels who longs to embrace us. We will not find Him in the cheap or the trivial, the banal or the false. We will not find Him by chasing after the easy or in the delusions of grandeur. We will not find Him in the far country of sins which masquerade as virtue. We will not find Him in powers that dehumanize us or others. Powers which show little or no value to human life.

Nor will we find our Lord while nursing our grievances about the way others receive the Grace of God. We will miss the living Christ if we are perpetually jealous or trapped in a web of self-pity. We will miss the living Christ if like the elder brother in today's parable, we resent the compassion a loving father shows His sons. We will miss the living Christ if we resent His love for other sinners.

But, it will feel like a homecoming when we hear God's words as personal address: "This my son was lost and is now found. Son, you are always with me. All that is mine is yours!!" These words never grow old. They are forever new. How long has it been since you have heard them? Too long? Has the grace of almighty God hardened into something you somehow have to deserve rather than the free gift given to us at the cross of our Lord? Welcome this gift with thanksgiving, joyful thanksgiving!

Two related stories: one global, one personal.

This winter's earthquakes continue to stun, continue to hurt. The passage of time may remove their images from our vision, but the deep wounds in Haiti and Chile will not heal overnight. One looks hard, yearning to see evidence of the grace of almighty God in such destruction. But, then there is evidence – just as there is evidence in the embrace of a Father who welcomes his son home, and reassures another resentful son – that there is enough love to go around. Monday before last, Chile's President, Michelle Bachelet, did something unusual in the wake of the disastrous earthquake. She condemned the looting, imposed curfews, and sent in 14,000 troops since authorities instructed the police to look the other way. These directions offer no surprise.

She also asked, not demanded, but asked, not in exchange for money or any other kind of reward: President Bachelet asked the nation's grocers to give away food and necessities. Only a small minority of them were indignant – resentful of the call to distribute that which we all need – bread to eat, a cup to share. The report that I read indicated that by Thursday the looting had stopped. It is strange, almost contradictory. Great crises can become the avenue through which we see love we never thought possible. They can even help us return home where the love of God surrounds us with a love stronger than death.

A personal story. When I was 16 our family had one of those donnybrook family arguments. I don't remember what it was about, exactly. I just know that we had it and we all spoke words we would come to regret and hurled threats which threatened only we who made them. If your family never has those kinds of arguments, I applaud you. You can switch off the remainder of this sermon! But, ours became so intense that I took off – preferring to sleep elsewhere, at a friend's house. He had come to ours when things got bad at his!

Finally, I went home about 4:00 the next morning, surprised a little bit that the door would be open. I crawled into my bed. The next morning I awoke to a nudge from my father. He called my name. He said – “We can do better. I'm sorry for what happened here last night!” I buried my face deep in the pillow – trying to pretend that I didn't care. What I was really doing was hiding my tears, and weeping with cries of repentance. In retrospect, it was as though the parable of the Prodigal sons was being played out in my family of origin. Perhaps it has played out in yours!

In the end the question is not who has sinned the most – or who has strayed the farthest, or who is the most prodigal. That's not the question. Christ died for all of us! In the end, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation to you, me, and everyone with ears to hear. Come Home! Home to where God is – whose embrace is compassionate, whose love never dies!

Wherever you are, the invitation is the same. Come home. Home to where the Grace of God is amazing, and the music of His love never ends. Amen.

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